

## **STEREOTYPES AND THE DISCURSIVE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF INTERGROUP DIFFERENTIATION: TALKING ABOUT 'THE OTHER' IN A GLOBAL BUSINESS ORGANIZATION**

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### **Abstract**

This article analyzes how employees in a global business organization talk about their colleagues in other countries. Employees were asked to discuss their work practices in focus group settings, and give examples of how they experience 'the other'. Using Discursive Psychology and Politeness Theory as the analytic approaches, the article analyzes pieces of discourse to disclose social psychological phenomena such as group identity, intergroup differentiation, and stereotypes. The analyses show that talking about 'the other' is potentially face-threatening, and mitigating discourse features are used repeatedly to soften the criticism. We also see how uncovering stereotypes is a mutual accomplishment in the group, and how group members gradually move from relatively innocent to blatantly negative outgroup stereotypes. The analyses also show that participants engage in meta-reflections on the nature of stereotypes, which may serve as another mitigating device, and that talk about 'the other' is used to create intergroup differentiation. Finally, the article discusses the implications of these findings for cross-cultural communication and work practices in organizations.

**Keywords:** Stereotypes; Politeness; Mitigation; Intergroup differentiation; Cross-cultural communication; Discourse analysis.

### **1. Introduction**

Much of our social perception goes far beyond the information we are given. Based on a whole range of visual and auditory cues, we make inferences about people we do not know, and we make assumptions about the different social categories we think they belong to. In other words, we stereotype. Lippmann (1965) sees stereotypes as mental concepts, pictures in our heads which govern the process of perception. He argues that stereotyping is necessary for our orientation in the world because the real environment is too big and complex for direct acquaintance, and therefore, we use stereotypes to reconstruct the world to provide simplicity and order. What pictures we carry in our heads is defined by our culture, so for Lippmann, stereotypes are culturally defined mental constructs which are needed for orientation in a complex world.

Despite globalization with increasing mobility and contact between countries, national stereotypes continue to have a significant impact on work processes and cross-cultural communication in business contexts (see Ladegaard 2007). Operario and Fiske (2001) argue that because stereotypes have an elusive nature, they are sometimes difficult to identify, so their presence in organizational contexts can be ubiquitous.

Therefore, they argue, “one of the greatest challenges that stereotypes pose to organizations is that they go largely unchallenged” (p. 56). Another problem with stereotypes and other forms of social categorization in organizations is that they often lead to ingroup favoritism which, in turn, may lead to derogation of outgroup members (Fiske and Lee 2008).

Traditionally, attitudes and stereotypes in organizational contexts have been elicited using direct (or indirect) measures in questionnaires. However, a potential problem with this approach is that most of the stereotyping processes occur outside the perceiver’s awareness, and therefore, people may deny they have stereotypes, or that stereotypes bias their decisions (Banaji and Greenwald 1995). An alternative approach to analyzing stereotypes is to look at discourse (see, for example, Potter and Wetherell 1987). Discourse is not a neutral carrier of meaning but a social practice in itself. The discursive approach, which adheres to a social constructivist epistemology, argues that stereotypes are social and ideological representations which are “socially and discursively constructed in the course of everyday communication, and, once objectified, assume an independent and sometimes prescriptive reality” (Augoustinos, Walker and Donaghue 2006: 258). So discursive psychologists would argue against Lippmann’s assumption that stereotypes are mental templates and a by-product of the individual’s need to simplify a complex reality.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the use and functions of stereotypes using talk from an organizational context. The article reports from a large-scale study of global communication in Danish business organizations (see Ladegaard 2007, 2009). It analyzes excerpts from two focus group interviews in which employees who provide world-wide IT support discuss their work practices. They were not encouraged to talk about stereotypes, but rather to conceptualize the notion of global communication and share their work experiences (see interview questions in 3.1), and in their discussions, national stereotypes and orientations towards intergroup scenarios were recurrent themes<sup>1</sup>. Although the perspective I shall adopt in this article relies very much on existing research, it differs in applying the findings to employees’ work practices in a global organization. The article will demonstrate that stereotypes have practical implications for intergroup communication and work practices. In other words, it adopts a truly pragmatic approach to stereotyping in discourse where a consideration of the context attributes meaning to the implications of language use (cf. Mey 2001). The other contribution this article makes to the literature is a small addition to the long list of mitigation strategies people may adopt when they engage in face-threatening activities (FTAs). Whilst most of the features used by the participants have been identified in other studies, two of the mitigation strategies – meta-reflections on the nature of stereotyping, and the use of non-verbal features – appear to be relatively unexplored.

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<sup>1</sup> Some analysts would argue that a focus group setting is not ideal for analyzing people’s attitudes (see, for example, Edwards and Stokoe 2004), but this article presents two counter-arguments. First, that the interview questions did not focus on eliciting attitudes and stereotypes; rather these topics arose naturally from the participants’ discussions. In general, very little prompting was required because everyone was eager to share their views, so the participants discussed their stereotypes spontaneously with very little interference from the moderators. It is also evident that the discussions were characterized by a very informal, relaxed atmosphere. There was a lot of laughing and joking, and everyone seemed to be having a good time. The second counter-argument is that the distinction between ‘naturally occurring’ and ‘contrived data’ may not be as straightforward as some analysts have suggested (see Speer 2002 for a critical discussion).

Finally, the article argues that because politeness plays such an important role in the employees' repeated engagement in FTAs, we need to incorporate elements from Politeness Theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987) into our analytical framework in order to be able to adequately account for the participants' verbal and nonverbal behaviour.

First, the article provides a brief theory- and literature review, including a discussion of definitions, a discussion of approaches to discourse analysis, and a short review of other studies which have analyzed how stereotypes and prejudice are used in discourse. Secondly, it gives a brief account of the study from where the excerpts used for analysis were taken, followed by a micro-analysis of selected excerpts which show how the participants talk about issues which are potentially face-threatening, and how they use positive ingroup and negative outgroup stereotypes to create a cohesive universe, and to construct intergroup differentiation. Finally, the article discusses some of the implications of stereotyping for professional communication in organizations, particularly how it relates to intra-group harmony and how it may affect work practices, and what researchers and practitioners might do to minimize the damaging effects of stereotypes and prejudice in the workplace.

## **2. Theory and literature review**

### **2.1. Definitions**

In what we might call more traditional approaches to social psychology (socio-cognitive and social identity approaches), a stereotype is defined as “a mental representation of a social group and its members” (Augoustinos, Walker and Donaghue 2006: 242). A stereotype is a schema in the sense that it integrates incoming information, directs attention to certain events (and away from others), and colours the retrieval of information (ibid.). However, stereotypes also differ from most other schemas because of their potential social consequences. They work as justifications for acceptance or rejection of social groups, as well as a device for maintaining simplicity in perception and thinking about groups (Allport 1954), they serve to justify outgroup prejudice and derogation which may lead to ingroup positive distinctiveness (Tajfel 1981), and they serve ideological functions in that they validate the privileges of certain groups over others and justify exploitation because the success and privilege of certain groups are seen as legitimate and ‘natural’ (Jost and Banaji 1994). Another characteristic feature of stereotypes is that they tend to be shared by group members and are usually identifiable by all members of a particular culture. In language attitude research, for example, we see an example of social stereotypes being uniform across social groups within the same culture (see, for example, Garrett 2010 for a recent overview).

Discursive psychologists would deviate quite radically from the socio-cognitive and social identity approaches to stereotyping. They would argue that stereotyping and other forms of social categorization are discursive constructions which are created and negotiated in everyday talk and shaped by contextual and situational factors. Thus, discursive researchers would argue against the idea that stereotypes are cognitive templates used to simplify a complex world. Instead, they see stereotyping as a social practice – “*something we do, in talk*, in order to accomplish actions” (D. Edwards 1991: 517, emphasis in original). Furthermore, from a discursive perspective, stereotyping (and other forms of social categorization) used in talk are expected to be variable,

flexible, shifting, and even contradictory (cf. Wetherell and Potter 1992) – i.e. people are believed to orient their talk towards the discursive context, often to meet rhetorical ends (cf. Billig 1996).

In the next section, I shall consider in more detail the two theoretical and analytical frameworks which have informed the analyses in this article: Discursive Psychology and Politeness Theory.

## **2.2. Approaches to discourse analysis: Discursive psychology and politeness theory**

Stubbe *et al.* (2003: 372) argue that Discursive Psychology (DP) is “not so much a method as a theoretically informed analytic approach for understanding social psychological phenomena such as identity, inter-personal and inter-group relationships.” DP focuses on discursive practices and how participants use the linguistic and communicative resources available to them to justify, rationalize and guide their social behavior. As already mentioned, DP questions some of the assumptions which have been taken for granted in traditional, quantitative Social Psychology, for example that categorization into social groups arises from perception. According to DP, social categorization is constructed in discourse which means that fixed stereotypes associated with a specific categorization do not exist; rather, stereotypes are seen as discursive constructions created and negotiated in social interaction and shaped by contextual and situational factors (see Benwell and Stokoe 2006 for a review of DP-research).

In her outline of recent developments in DP, Wetherell (2001, 2003) argues that different strands have developed in the discipline leading to internal disputes. Some researchers in DP draw heavily on the principles of Conversation Analysis for their analyses and insist that our social life is discursively constructed and therefore, only what participants make demonstrably relevant in discourse is of interest to the analyst (see, for example, D. Edwards 1997). Other researchers in DP take a broader (sometimes critical) perspective and insist that talk only represents a fragment of our social life and consequently, other factors such as the wider social and ideological context outside the talk may be included in the analysis of discourse (see, for example, Reynolds and Wetherell 2003). In conclusion, what DP researchers have in common is “the disciplinary focus on psychological topics rather than one common intellectual position on discourse” (Wetherell 2001: 382).

The analyses in this article are informed by DP in that they focus on psychological phenomena in discourse, but they take a broader perspective where wider contexts, both inside and outside discourse, are taken into account. Moreover, the article also considers insights from more traditional approaches to social psychology (socio-cognitive and social identity traditions) in the attempt to arrive at a more integrated approach to social categorization (see the discussion in Augoustinos *et al.* 2006, chapter 9). I agree with discursive researchers that the theoretical and methodological developments within DP have made a valuable contribution to Social Psychology (as well as to Discourse Analysis), but would argue that the usefulness of DP would be enhanced by *incorporating* it into existing theories in Social Psychology, rather than suggesting that the discursive paradigm should *replace* traditional theories (cf. Harré and Stearns 1995). So whilst this article provides documentation for one of the key assumptions in DP – that stereotypes in text and talk are variable, flexible and shifting, as opposed to rigid a priori cognitive entities – it also argues against the, arguably, radical position taken by

some DP scholars that there is nothing beyond discourse. This discursive reductionism (or 'black box' approach) has led to severe criticism of DP (see, for example, Abrams and Hogg 1990). As Augoustinos *et al.* (2006: 63) argue: "Cognitive concepts such as attitudes and beliefs are part and parcel of our everyday language and most people talk of their 'attitudes', 'beliefs' and 'opinions'. Shouldn't this experience alone be taken as evidence that these things really do exist?" So whilst many researchers in DP would argue that socio-cognitive approaches are not valid, this article takes the position advocated by Augoustinos *et al.* (2006: 301) that "a theoretically adequate social psychology must integrate the different positions afforded by social cognitive, social identity, social representations, and discursive perspectives", because currently, each of these perspectives is, in its own way, limited in its conceptualization, methodology or epistemology. Therefore, this article argues that eclectic approaches are more likely to provide us with a fuller understanding of our discursive and social reality (see also J. Edwards 2010, chapter 2 for a critical discussion of DP).

Another weakness of the DP approach, arguably, is that it does not pay enough attention to the importance of politeness phenomena in discourse. Janney and Arndt (2005) argue that the modification of verbal and non-verbal behaviour to avoid conflicts, and to create a sense of affiliation between partners, is of paramount importance in any culture. Thus, because these encounters are virtually loaded with face-threatening activities (FTAs), Politeness Theory (PT) seems to have an important component to add to the analyses because it recognizes, more than any other framework, the overriding significance of politeness phenomena in regulating verbal (and non-verbal) behaviour (Janney and Arndt 2005).

The main focus of Brown and Levinson's (1987) PT is the notion of face (cf. Goffman 1967), and particularly how participants handle FTAs. Brown and Levinson define a Model Person as someone who has "two particular wants ... the want to be unimpeded and the want to be approved of in certain respects" (p. 58). These two wants are referred to as negative and positive face, or independence and involvement, and the authors argue that all human communication is a negotiation of positive and negative face between speaker and hearer. Certain speech acts, by their very nature, are potentially face-threatening, for speaker or hearer, or for both interactants, for example, requests, complaints, compliments and apologies, and, we might add, talking about people in other countries. Some of these FTAs threaten the negative face of speaker and/or hearer, other FTAs threaten the positive face of speaker and/or hearer. Some FTAs threaten both positive and negative face, a complaint, for example, and voicing stereotypes could be perceived as a kind of indirect complaint. When dealing with an FTA, such as a complaint, a speaker may select a number of different strategies in order to minimize the potential threat of an FTA. Brown and Levinson (1987) order these five strategies according to their relative politeness (see also Stubbe *et al.* 2003: 362-364):

(1) *On record baldly* is the least polite way of performing an FTA, and it involves no attempt by the speaker to acknowledge the hearer's face wants by means of redressive action, which Brown and Levinson (1987) simply define as any action that gives face to the addressee (p. 69). This strategy involves, for example, voicing explicit disagreement, or direct criticism, without hedging or mitigating the utterance in any way.

(2) *On record with redressive action: positive politeness* involves performing the FTA but, at the same time, attending to the hearer's positive face. For example, voicing an

FTA but also employing involvement strategies such as giving approval, showing sympathy, or using a friendly address form.

(3) *On record with redressive action: negative politeness* involves performing the FTA while acknowledging the hearer's negative face wants, for example by giving deference, or by emphasizing the social distance between speaker and hearer.

(4) *Off record* involves the speaker using an off-record approach in performing an FTA, for example complaining or criticizing indirectly without explicitly stating the object of the complaint or the critique. This strategy allows the speaker to evade the responsibility for the FTA because it could be interpreted as just a trivial remark.

(5) *Avoidance of FTA* obviously means that performing the FTA is avoided altogether. This strategy is the most polite of the five strategies.

I shall now look briefly at some other studies which have analyzed the functions and expressions of stereotypes and prejudice in text and talk.

### 2.3. *Stereotypes in discourse: A brief review*

A considerable amount of research has focused on the denial of racism in contemporary text and talk (see, for example, van Dijk 1992, 2008; Condor 2006; Condor, Figgou, Abell, Gibson and Stevenson 2006). The research shows that because negative talk about 'the other' is perceived as inconsistent with general views of tolerance, prejudiced discourse needs to be hedged, mitigated, excused, or explained. A common strategy is to use disclaimers (such as "I'm not racist but ..."), or different types of denial (such as "I did not do/say/mean that"), or to follow a double strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation (van Dijk 1992; see also Verkuyten 2001; Augoustinos and Every 2007). Another common finding is that people use disclaimers to soften or license their stereotypical views, or they use what has been termed 'oracular reasoning' (Galasinska and Galasinska 2003). This coping strategy is used when a stereotype is confronted with contradictory evidence, but the evidence is ignored or rejected. It is used to resolve a dilemma between contradictory ideological stances but "the dilemma gets resolved supporting [...] the narrative of separation, negativity, or [...] the narrative of difference" (p. 860) (for an overview of experimental work on stereotype justification and suppression, see Crandall and Eshleman 2003).

Another common finding in the discourse analytic studies is that the expression of prejudice normally constitutes a collaborative accomplishment (Condor 2006). Group members construct their stereotypes together and take joint responsibility for 'policing conversation' (i.e. correcting, mitigating and suppressing prejudiced talk) (cf. Condor *et al.* 2006). Furthermore, they are oriented towards the local context of the talk, and this means that prejudiced talk may serve a variety of functions (to claim the floor, to bully, to amuse, to shock, to show solidarity etc. – see Condor 2006). Studies have also found that negative outgroup stereotypes constructed in group contexts tend to be highly variable, ambiguous, even contradictory (Wetherell and Potter 1992; see also Billig *et al.* 1988; van den Berg 2003). Group members appear to construct their stereotypes so that they fit the discursive context which means the stereotypes expressed by the group may be contradictory not only across individuals but also within individual group members. This is seen as an indication that people change their stereotypes to fit the discursive context (usually for rhetorical ends). Ladegaard (2011a), for example, asked group members to write down their attitudes towards seven well-known national groups,

and then discuss what they had written. The group discussion demonstrated that people would readily contradict what they had said in the pre-discussion questionnaire, or they would contradict themselves during the course of the discussion. This points to the unfinished nature of attitudes, and to the fact that a change in the rhetorical circumstances may lead to counter-attitudes being expressed (Billig 1996). Ladegaard's study also concludes that prejudiced discourses are constructed to legitimize the repression of and discriminatory behavior against some outgroup members (cf. Jost and Banaji 1994; see also Tileaga 2005; Ladegaard 2011a).

Another significant finding from many of the discourse analytic studies of stereotypes in talk is that personal experience is often used as a rhetorical strategy to justify cultural generalizations. Tusting, Crawshaw and Callen (2002), for example, found that even though the participants were encouraged to discuss their stereotypes, they would still legitimate their generalizations by referring to personal experience. Stereotypes become acceptable under certain discursive conditions, and their expression is usually justified by reference to personal experience (see also Ladegaard 2011a). Other studies have looked at how participants either include or exclude themselves from prejudiced talk by using, or avoiding, certain pronouns, for example (see de Cillia, Reisigl and Wodak 1999; Hornsey 2008; Ladegaard 2011a, 2011b). De Cillia and colleagues study how national identities are constructed in discourse; they identify the preferred linguistic strategies, for example how different pronouns are partially or totally addressee-inclusive or exclusive, and they argue that the one and only national identity does not exist, but different identities are discursively negotiated according to context. The study concludes that the participants simultaneously construct national sameness and uniqueness, and differences to other national collectives, and that potentially controversial positions, such as negative outgroup stereotypes, are mitigated by other group members (see also Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, and Liebhart 2009).

### **3. The study**

The focus group interviews used in this article are part of a larger study of global communication in business organizations (see Ladegaard 2007 for more details). I shall now look briefly at this study to provide the necessary background for the analysis.

#### **3.1. Background**

The study was conducted in the IT support unit of a large global organization in Denmark. The research group behind The Global Communications Project (see Acknowledgements) approached a number of global business corporations to enquire about their possible interest in the project. The present company volunteered and suggested that the IT Service Center would be an appropriate venue for data collection because of the employees' heavy engagement in global communication. The idea behind the project is that business organizations and researchers collaborate on analyzing aspects of global communication. The organizations identify authentic problems in their everyday global communication, and researchers record and analyze this real-life data in order to help solve specific communication problems, and develop existing theoretical perspectives on global communication.

Prior to the focus group interviews, members of the Global Communications Research Team spent about five weeks in the company doing ethnographic observations. This meant that employees and researchers knew each other well before the interviews, and this is probably one of the reasons why it was possible to create a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere in the focus groups. Furthermore, an online questionnaire was distributed to all members of staff to get personal information from each member of the company as well as factual information about the employees' work-related communicative activities. This was done to help us identify potential problems in their communication, and to help us focus on relevant questions in the interviews. Based on this input from the staff, it was decided that the focus group discussions should focus on the following broad questions:

- (a) How is global communication perceived and conceptualized?
- (b) What determines how one communicates globally in the most appropriate way?
- (c) What is the importance of interlocutor, country and situation in determining the outcome of a global communicative interaction?
- (d) What does one need to know, linguistically and culturally, to communicate globally?
- (e) Are there examples of miscommunication when interacting with people from other cultures?
- (f) Is there any pattern in the miscommunication experienced by the groups? - In relation to specific cultures? – In relation to specific situations? – In relation to specific people?
- (g) Are there any preconceived positive or negative attitudes in the groups towards certain cultures? - If yes, which, and why?

### ***3.2. The focus group interviews***

One of the strengths of the focus group is that group dynamism may create interviews with more diversified responses. The intranet was used to issue invitations to everyone in the Service Center who was engaged in global IT support on a daily basis. Fourteen people volunteered to participate; some of them were native speakers of Danish, some of them were from outside Denmark, so two focus groups were designed based on the participants' language competence, one in Danish, one in English, with seven people in each group: four men and three women. Their age range varied from 24 to 48 years, with a mean age of 35.3 years, and they had between three months and eight years of experience working in the company's IT Service Centre. All the participants were engaged, on a regular basis, in IT support to the company's European subsidiaries, and their day-to-day duties included, first and foremost, business service support, but also IT implementation, software authorization, logistics, programming, quality assurance, statistics, and systems development. Despite the apparent diversity of these assignments, they all involved regular communication with people from all over Europe, and, for short-term projects and assignments, also communication with colleagues from the company's subsidiaries in other parts of the world.

Prior to the ethnographic observations in the company, each member of staff in the IT Service Centre agreed to participating in the project (only one member of staff out of 42 did not give her consent), and prior to the focus group discussions, each participant signed a written consent form allowing the research group full access to the data. The general terms of the agreement between the company and the researchers were

negotiated by the company and the university's lawyers, and it was agreed that researchers could use anonymized data for research purposes, and in return, the company should have full access to the results (which should be presented to and discussed with the staff) and get copies of all papers and articles in which data from the company was used. Each focus group interview lasted two hours, and the same three fieldworkers were involved in both groups: two moderators asking questions, and one observer taking notes. The focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed in their entirety by two of the moderators (who had also been involved in the ethnographic observations in the company).

I shall now turn to an analysis of selected excerpts from the focus group discussions. They were selected because they show something about social identity processes, and the use of stereotypes in intergroup differentiation, and because they were typical examples of how group members talked about 'the other'.

#### **4. Data analysis**

In this section, I shall first look at an excerpt which demonstrates how the participants talk about 'the other', i.e. which discourse strategies are employed when talk is constantly potentially face-threatening. The excerpt is from the second half of the Danish focus group interview<sup>2</sup> where the respondents were encouraged to discuss how they deal with service calls from strangers with whom they have never communicated before<sup>3</sup> (see Appendix for transcription conventions).

##### *Excerpt 1*

1. Mod: if you receive a service request from someone and you have no idea who the
2. person is, then before you reply, what do you do? Do you have any ideas
3. about that person which [BK laughing] will help you determine what you do?
4. BK: I have some general ideas yes
5. MP: well, let me put it like this, I may have, you know if I get something ah some
6. kind of service request, and I can see it's perhaps from Copenhagen, then I
7. think it's those people from the Devil's Island<sup>4</sup>, and then I have some kind of

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<sup>2</sup> All translations are mine, but to ensure the accuracy of the translations, multiple translators have been involved, including native speakers of Danish with complete mastery of English, and native speakers of English with complete mastery of Danish.

<sup>3</sup> The question of how the participants deal with service calls from people they have never communicated with before turned out to be salient throughout both focus groups. Several comments reveal that the employees need to have some cues to go by when they reply to a service call from a stranger, so the notion of an anonymous global citizen with no national or cultural background appears to be a theoretical construct more than anything. The employees cannot communicate with a stranger with no identity, so they often go to the company's Intranet to find out more about the person. Cultural background, gender and age were identified as the most significant cues in terms of providing these 'general ideas' (Excerpt 1, l. 4) required for interpersonal communication (see Ladegaard, 2007 for more details).

<sup>4</sup> Denmark consists of Jutland, a peninsula attached to Germany, the island of Funen, the island of Zealand with the capital Copenhagen, and a number of smaller islands. People from Jutland sometimes refer to Zealand as the Devil's Island ('Djævløen' in Danish), presumably implying that the island is ruled by the devil, or inhabited by little devils. The term is borrowed from French, *Île du Diable*, a small

8. prejudice about the people at HQ [laughter] [11 turns left out]  
 9. Mod: (to BK) you said you had some ah/  
 10. BK: /yeah but it's just some terribly general  
 11. ideas/  
 12. Mod: /yeah okay  
 13. BK: but that doesn't mean I'm not open towards other/  
 14. Mod: /no but that's how we/  
 15. BK: /but I  
 16. have you know a bit like the French you know I type-cast them sort of I think  
 17. they are difficult and argumentative [laughing] and actually a bit like  
 18. opposed you know but of course that doesn't mean you can't meet French  
 19. people who are not like that  
 20. Mod: sure  
 21. BK: the Germans are very sort of [she makes a stern face and consecutive vertical  
 22. movements with her hand in the air]  
 23. JQ: yeah right  
 24. BK: it's true isn't it?  
 25. JQ: a 'no-nonsense-brief-to-the-point'-attitude  
 26. Other: yeah mm  
 27. BK: here I come and that's how it should be  
 28. MP: don't you think it's something we were brought up to believe? [laughter]  
 29. no but you know without ah: that it's just something we're carrying around  
 30. BK: it probably is but sometimes it's actually true you know (.) and sometimes  
 31. it isn't, right so you just need to be open, right  
 32. KS: exceptions  
 33. BK: yes sure, there're always exceptions, right  
 34. JQ: sure

#### 4.1. Discourse strategies

This excerpt is typical of the discourse patterns we see in the focus groups: the participants perform FTAs while, at the same time, attending to positive face needs. The preferred strategy is *On record with redressive action: positive politeness*, with the slight difference that the FTA is not performed against the hearer, but against a third party who is not present. However, the activity is still face-threatening, not just for the missing 'other' but also for the speakers. They all appear to be painfully aware that voicing their negative outgroup stereotypes is not socially acceptable in a global organization which deliberately avoids any national or ethnocentric references in their marketing in order that any country should be able to claim ownership<sup>5</sup>.

The speakers use various linguistic strategies to mitigate the FTAs. First, they use disclaimers, such as BK's remark in ll. 10-11 ('yeah but it's just some terribly general ideas'), and further in l. 13 ('but that doesn't mean I'm not open towards other/'). The

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island off the coast of French Guiana, which was used for the deportation of convicts by Napoleon's government.

<sup>5</sup> It was brought up several times during the ethnographic observations in the company, as well as in meetings and interviews with staff, that this company is trying hard to be perceived as 'global'. On the company website, in advertising campaigns, and in company policies, no reference is made to the fact that the company is Danish. This is done, according to the company's Head of Communications (personal communication) to "discourage any form of ethnocentricity and to encourage employees around the world to become global citizens."

moderator has asked her to elaborate on the comment she made in line 5, and before she talks about her French and German colleagues, she takes careful precaution by pointing out that her ideas are terribly general, and that she is also open to other ideas. We see another disclaimer in the last part of BK's comment about the French. She has just voiced her prejudice against the French, and to soften her criticism, she adds another disclaimer: "but of course that doesn't mean you can't meet French people who are not like that" (ll. 18-19). Another example of disclaimers frequently employed in the group is to emphasize that the negative stereotypes they have about other national groups do not apply to their present colleagues. The exchange in Excerpt 2 is a typical example. The participants return to the difficult Frenchmen (cf. l. 17 above), and the moderator asks:

*Excerpt 2*

1. Mod: do you have any examples, how have you experienced (.) the difficult
2. Frenchmen for example?
3. BK: not the colleagues we have at the moment
4. JQ: no
5. BK: no not at all
5. Mod: okay
6. BK: no it's way back
7. Mod: okay

We may see these precautionary statements as a way to make sure that the respondents do not alienate their colleagues in France by emphasizing that whatever they say about the French does not apply to their present colleagues. However, in subsequent turns not presented here, one of the respondents admits to having stereotypes about their French colleagues. He refers to someone who has caused problems in the department (she uses the wrong procedures when she submits her service requests, as discussed later in the interview), and then he says: "we have a bit of a laugh sometimes you know, but in fact it is a typical Frenchman." He minimizes the potential threat of his FTA by saying they laugh about it, and subsequently, he adds a disclaimer – a meta-reflection on the harmlessness of stereotyping: "I don't really know if there's any harm in that" - which could be an attempt to soften the FTA by arguing that stereotypes may in fact be quite harmless.

As this excerpt illustrates, we also have to acknowledge the co-construction of talk in interview settings. Although the moderator's question in ll. 1-2 was not intended to provoke prejudiced talk, it nevertheless yielded comments about 'the other' which had the potential to be derogatory (see also Excerpt 5, l. 1). And although the moderators generally said very little throughout both focus groups (and their comments were usually restricted to brief questions and minimal response), this should of course not be interpreted as evidence that the talk was not, at least to some extent, oriented towards them. We should never ignore the role of the interviewer, or any other 'stranger', in the co-construction of talk in interview settings – although I would argue that the presence of the researchers in the company during the ethnographic observations made them appear less like strangers and we might, therefore, have had less of an impact on 'policing' conversations and suppressing prejudiced talk (see Condor et al. 2006; see also Pomerantz and Zemel 2003 for further discussion).

Another discourse strategy which is used repeatedly in these excerpts to mitigate the FTAs is hedging and other features of mitigation. One example is MP's response in

Excerpt 1, ll. 5-8: “well, let me put it like this, I may have, you know if I get something, ah some kind of service request ...” All the features in this utterance could be seen as mitigation whose function it is to soften the implicit criticism in the remark about “those people from the Devil’s Island” (l. 7). The mitigation continues in MP’s next remarks:

*Excerpt 3*

1. MP: we’re just sort of, they are a little bit different you know, well you know
2. perhaps it’s just prejudice and stuff but you know I’d like to point out that it’s
3. not as bad as it used to be
4. Mod: okay
5. MP: before it was like, it didn’t really matter where you were, there were kind of
6. huge differences between Jutland and Zealand
7. Mod: okay how?
8. MP: well, you know it’s a bit like if you’re in western Jutland as opposed to
9. Copenhagen, then it’s perhaps a bit like they’re so damn cool over there [in
10. Copenhagen] and fast whereas in Jutland we say let’s think again

If we look at MP’s account of these two apparently diverse regional groups, we do not get the impression that ‘they’ are just a little bit different from ‘us’. In fact, they appear to be very different (ll. 9-10). The implication of this remark is indeed face-threatening; he refers to a common stereotype among people in Jutland of people from Copenhagen: they don’t think before they speak (see Ladegaard 2001). However, the company HQ is also in Copenhagen, so, as we can see in Excerpt 1, l. 8, MP’s remark also applies to the people who run the company. This may explain the high degree of hedging, including his precautionary comment “well you know perhaps it’s just prejudice and stuff” (l. 2).

We see another example of hedging and mitigation in BK’s remark about the French and the Germans in Excerpt 1 (ll. 16-19 & 21-22). Her statement about the French is a prime example of heavy hedging: “but I have you know a bit like the French you know I type-cast them sort of I think they are difficult and argumentative [laughing] and actually a bit like opposed you know”. The repeated use of mitigation in this example demonstrates the seriousness of the FTA, but also that BK’s statement is an example of a prejudiced identity which is unacceptable in the context of a global organization (van Dijk 1992, 2008). As the focus group discussion progresses, we sense that the participants are more prone to discuss what we might call their ‘covert stereotypes’ (cf. Ladegaard 1998a), i.e. the stereotypes they are reluctant to talk about because they represent attitudes which are not socially acceptable in the context (Brief 1998). This may also explain why BK resorts to nonverbal cues when it comes to characterizing her Germans colleagues. She only verbalizes a mitigated introduction: “the Germans are very sort of” (l. 21), and the rest of her message is conveyed nonverbally. She makes a stern face, a small mouth with lips tight together, and then a series of short, precise vertical movements with her hand in the air. The nonverbal cues might be applied because they are more subtle, and thus, less face-threatening because the FTA itself is never verbalized. Thus, we might argue that nonverbal cues are a convenient alternative mitigation strategy because their exact meaning is open to interpretation and therefore, it is harder to accuse the ‘speaker’ for being prejudiced. Consequently, it is a prime example of an *Off record* strategy in PT terminology (Brown and Levinson 1987). However, BK’s colleagues appear to have no problems interpreting the nonverbal cues. JQ agrees (l. 25) and later he gives a verbal interpretation of BK’s movements – they represent a common stereotype of the Germans, an ‘Ordnung muss sein’-attitude (=

order must prevail), in combination with extreme efficiency (no nonsense, brief, to the point, l. 25) and a certain degree of arrogance (here I come ... l. 27) (see Emig 2000).

Another common discourse strategy is how group members construct their discourse together. They seem to depend on the support of other group members in the verbalization of negative outgroup stereotypes (Condor *et al.* 2006). One example is the way they reach consensus about the nature of stereotypes, and how they need to be cautious (Excerpt 1, ll. 28-34). This strategy is even more predominant in Excerpt 5 so I shall return to it later. I shall now look at the functions of ingroup-outgroup stereotypes.

#### **4.2. Talking about ‘the other’: Intergroup differentiation**

Talking about ‘the other’ is not only potentially face-threatening and, in the context, socially unacceptable; it also provides examples of intergroup processes. Hogg and Terry (2001: 1) argue that organizations provide a near-perfect arena for the operation of social identity processes because they consist of internally structured groups, located in a complex network of intergroup relations characterized by differences in power, status and prestige. In their talk about their colleagues in other countries, the employees adopt an intergroup approach (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 1986; Hogg and Abrams 2003). An example is MP in Excerpt 3, l. 1 who comments on his colleagues on Zealand, “they are a little bit different you know”. This is an example of intergroup discourse, an orientation into a ‘We-They’ dichotomy, and it shows how we think about ‘the other’: They are different, and the implication is that ‘we’ represent the norm from which ‘they’ deviate (Wodak *et al.* 2009). We see the same idea further developed in MP’s next turns. First, he reconfirms the intergroup scenario by emphasizing intergroup differences: “there were kind of huge differences between Jutland and Zealand” (Excerpt 3, ll. 5-6); then, he explains how these intergroup differences may materialize: “they’re so damn cool over there and fast whereas in Jutland we say let’s think again” (ll. 9-10). It is interesting that MP should pick local, intra-cultural differences to make his point when the emphasis throughout the focus group has been on global communication. This may be an example of what Giles (1979) refers to as perceived linguistic and non-linguistic boundary continua. Individuals feel a greater need to emphasize intergroup differences when the perceived differences between in- and outgroups are relatively minor, whereas relatively major perceived differences need not be emphasized. What explains this is the desire to mark oneself off from outgroups, and the closer one is perceived to be to various outgroups, the greater the need to make one’s ingroup favorably distinct by emphasizing intergroup differences (see also Ladegaard 2011a, 2011b).

The next example of intergroup discourse is BK’s characterization in Excerpt 1 of her French colleagues as “difficult and argumentative” (l. 17). A common stereotype of the Danes is that they are consensus-seeking and prepared to do almost anything to avoid conflict (Knudsen 1996), so to describe the French as difficult and argumentative is to emphasize intergroup differences. This is further emphasized by BK’s next remark where the French are characterized as “a bit like opposed” (ll. 17-18); again, the implication is that ‘we’ are the norm to which the French are opposed. This dichotomy is re-emphasized later (in subsequent turns not presented here) when a particularly difficult requester is identified as “a typical Frenchman”.

In Excerpt 1, ll. 21-27, we see how internal agreement is used to strengthen intergroup differentiation. BK is about to voice her stereotypes of the Germans but instead, resorts to nonverbal cues. We have already seen how the participants are capable of interpreting BK's nonverbal cues and reach consensus. Thus, voicing negative outgroup stereotypes becomes a group accomplishment; they construct the discourse together and internal agreement creates a cohesive universe (Hogg 1993). Outgroups are conveniently constructed as difficult, argumentative, opposed, somewhat arrogant and overly efficient, and this leaves the ingroup as the positive contrast. Ingroup-outgroup cohesiveness is reinforced by emphasizing negative outgroup stereotypes, and implicitly, this leads to an emphasis of positive ingroup stereotypes.

However, whilst being engaged in the construction of a cohesive universe, the participants are still painfully aware of their constant engagement in FTAs. They use mitigation and disclaimers repeatedly, and they also engage in meta-reflections on the nature of stereotypes (Excerpt 1, ll. 28-34). BK argues that "sometimes it's actually true and sometimes it isn't" (Excerpt 1, ll. 30-31) which reminds us of the well-known 'kernel-of-truth' debate (Mackie 1973). In their meta-reflections on stereotypes, the participants go from one extreme: that stereotypes are nothing but ideas, or something we were brought up to believe, to the other extreme: that sometimes they are actually true. It is possible that the function of these meta-reflections is to disclaim or mitigate FTAs, or, alternatively, that the employees genuinely believe that stereotypes are sometimes true. KS's very last comment in Excerpt 5, l. 30, "no it's true it's actually true", suggests that he thinks that (some of) the generalizations the group has come up with are in fact true.

At a more general level, these discussions provide a good example of intergroup differentiation (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 1986), and Social Identity Theory could be applied as an explanatory framework (Tajfel 1982; Hogg and Terry 2001). We could argue that what the employees accomplish through these discussions is to create a cohesive universe (Hogg 1993), i.e. by emphasizing negative outgroup stereotypes, they manage to indirectly reinforce positive ingroup stereotypes. They implicitly present themselves as the norm from which their foreign colleagues deviate, and they enhance a positive self-esteem by homing in on the negative attributes of comparable outgroups. Thus, group stereotypes become consensual through sharing and talking, and consequently, ingroup-outgroup boundaries become reinforced, and ingroup identity more salient (see Haslam, Oakes, Reynolds and Turner 1999; Klein, Tindale and Brower 2008).

This process is also evident in the English focus group. The respondents are discussing how they cope with service calls with dodgy English, and they agree they have to somehow reconstruct meaning on the basis of what they know about these languages, and their colleagues' cultural background. Excerpt 4 (quoted verbatim) is the conclusion to this discussion.

*Excerpt 4*

1. KO: and then we have to rethink about their language and /culture, we build
2. our sentence in a different way
3. NH: /mm [laughter]
4. KO: /all different from our/ Danish [name of company] English [laughter]
5. BT: /we do it normal/
6. OD: so the world's wrong, yeah that's it [laughter]

In this excerpt, the employees openly acknowledge the ethnocentric position they take. The other colleagues' language is different from their 'company-English'; they refer to their own work procedures as "normal", and they conclude that "the world's wrong". The constant laughter suggests that they take an ironic stance on their own ethnocentric behavior; they know that positioning themselves as the norm from which the rest of the world deviates is not morally acceptable, so they joke about their own ethnocentrism. Throughout both focus groups, we see that laughter is a recurring feature (see also Excerpt 5). It may function primarily as a face-saving device, but it may also indicate how the employees try to distance themselves from their own ethnocentric behavior. They manage to create a cohesive universe with clearly defined outgroups, and a clearly defined ingroup, and boundaries between them, and they manage to position themselves as 'right', and consequently "the world is wrong".

### **4.3. Uncovering negative outgroup stereotypes**

To analyze how outgroup stereotypes are uncovered, we shall look at another excerpt. A recurrent theme in the focus groups is efficiency, for example the speed with which requests issued to subsidiaries in different countries are dealt with. Some subsidiaries, the employees argue, are very slow in responding, others are fast and efficient. In the English focus group they discuss how, in some subsidiaries, "there seems to be a lot of talking and no decisions", and in the Danish focus group, there is general agreement with CX's comment that "service calls from southern Europe are perhaps a little more time-consuming but I'm not sure if it's the culture or the people we're dealing with." Towards the end of the discussion, the Danish focus group returns to the question of efficiency, and they begin (partly as a joke) to compare the subsidiaries in different countries to different animals. This animal metaphor exercise was inspired by an informal discussion (overheard by one of the moderators during the ethnographic observations in the company) over lunch one day when the employees were joking about the (lack of) efficiency in some of their overseas subsidiaries by comparing them to different animals (turtles, snails, elephants etc.). The moderator's question in l. 1 relates to the speed with which different daughter-companies are expected to respond to service requests, but as the discussion progresses, it develops into something rather different.

#### *Excerpt 5*

1. Mod: then how about [name of company]-France what sort of animal is that?
2. IG: a raccoon
3. JQ: a raccoon? [laughing] [8 turns left out]
4. KS: or a fox or a wolf or something like that
5. Mod: okay
6. JQ: yes and something which is sort of unpredictable
7. MP: and someone you can't quite shake off
8. IG: a badger perhaps
9. KS: someone who goes his/her own ways [other: mm]
10. IG: yes
11. KS: someone who's capable of sort of like (.) anything
12. Mod. mm (1.0) Germany?
13. MP: that's like a German shepherd I suppose [laughter]

14. Mod: okay (.)  
 15. JQ: yeah and sometimes an /elephant right /damn big and  
 16. KS: /yes  
 17. IG: /clumsy  
 18. Mod: okay  
 19. JQ: big and clumsy yes indeed [laughter]  
 20. JQ: don't communicate internally [laughter]  
 21. JQ: if elephants don't do that I don't know (.)  
 22. Mod: what about Scotland (.) [3 turns left out]  
 23. JQ: don't know  
 24. KS: maybe they're a bit like a dog perhaps  
 25. BK: sort of kind and easy [laughter]  
 26. KS: a bit like a collie  
 27. BK: collie [laughter]  
 28. JQ: it's not a Scotch terrier  
 29. BK: no [laughter]  
 30. KS: no it's true it's actually true

It is difficult to know exactly what the employees are doing in this last part of the focus group interview. What started out as a discussion about efficiency seems to turn into a fun game (repeated laughter is a predominant feature throughout this discussion) where, again, the respondents' (negative) outgroup stereotypes are further developed. The fact that there seems to be a certain similarity between the animal metaphors associated with the company's European subsidiaries and the cultural generalizations of the Germans, French etc. proposed earlier (which again appear to be similar to the animal imagery discussed over lunch a few weeks earlier) suggests that the employees are in fact discussing their stereotypes also in the last part of the focus group.

The construction of animal metaphors in Excerpt 5 shows that uncovering negative outgroup stereotypes is a gradual process where the participants are building up the discourse together. We could argue that they are again using an *Off-record* strategy. The use of animal metaphors - and the fact they talk about companies, not people - allow them to criticize and stereotype indirectly and thus, evade the responsibility for the FTA. This may be one of the reasons why the employees' cultural generalizations are more overtly prejudiced in this last part of the discussion. If we consider the nature of the stereotypes they are proposing, we can see how they, arguably, move from relatively innocent to more negative characterizations. For example, the French subsidiary is first associated with a raccoon (l. 2); the next suggestion is "a fox or a wolf or something like that" (l. 5). This is taken further by JQ who suggests "something which is sort of unpredictable" (l. 6), and by MP who suggests "someone you can't quite shake off" (l. 7). Next, IG suggests "a badger" (l. 8), and KS interprets this as "someone who goes his/her own ways" (l. 9), and finally, suggests "someone who's capable of sort of like anything" (l. 11).

As lines 1-11 demonstrate, uncovering negative outgroup stereotypes is a gradual process and a mutual accomplishment in the group. From being a fairly neutral discussion about efficiency and adherence to deadlines and procedures in the company's European subsidiaries, it develops into a prejudiced discourse about other national cultures. The participants use a careful one-step-at-a-time approach where they gradually move from the relatively positive to the relatively negative end of a continuum of stereotypes about the French. They begin with the rather sweet and



7. [3 turns left out]  
 8. OD: I feel the same, and you know [laughing] priority changed [laughter] when did you  
 9. want that service call by, was it next year? [laughter]

The exercise of power is potentially significant in any intergroup scenario, not least if the scenario is a mother/daughter-company, or if one group is heavily dependant on the other (Reynolds and Platow 2003). This creates an asymmetrical power relationship which could be exploited, as Excerpt 6 demonstrates (see also Ladegaard 2008).

I shall now turn to summary of my findings followed by a general discussion of the functions of stereotypes in intergroup differentiation.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This discourse analysis of global employees' talk about 'the other' found firstly, that discussing negative outgroup stereotypes is potentially face-threatening which leads to repeated use of hedging, mitigation, and disclaimers to soften the criticism and legitimize behaviors which are socially unacceptable (van Dijk 1992, 2008; Tusting *et al.* 2002; Galasinska and Galasinska 2003). Thus, speakers get to perform FTAs, such as voicing negative outgroup stereotypes, while, at the same time, attending to the positive face needs of 'the other'. Secondly, the analysis found that the respondents engage in meta-reflective discussions on the nature of stereotypes. These reflections go from one extreme, that stereotypes are just "something we were brought up to believe", to the other extreme, that "sometimes they're actually true", and they function as disclaimers and support the employees' need to renounce any accusations they themselves, or the researchers, may have of them as being prejudiced, nationalistic or xenophobic (Condor *et al.* 2006). Through these meta-reflections, the respondents demonstrate awareness that they are engaged in FTAs, but also that disclosing negative outgroup stereotypes is not socially acceptable in a global organization (cf. footnote 5). Thirdly, the article discussed an example of nonverbal communication as an indirect means to express prejudice. It was argued that nonverbal cues are potentially a very effective mitigation strategy because they allow the 'speaker' to perform an FTA without being accused of prejudice, because the FTA is never verbalized, and the exact meaning of the nonverbal cues is open to interpretation. Thus, the use of nonverbal cues to perform an FTA could be seen as a prime example of an *Off record* strategy in PT terminology because it allows the 'speaker' to evade the responsibility of the FTA.

Furthermore, the analyses demonstrated that uncovering negative outgroup stereotypes is a mutual accomplishment in the group. Group members co-construct their stereotypes and they help each other interpret verbal and nonverbal cues to reach consensus about the content of their stereotypes. Agreement with, and verbal support from, other group members play an important part in assessing whether outgroup stereotypes become acceptable (Tusting *et al.* 2002), and acceptability is mutually accomplished in the group, and under certain discursive conditions, such as, for example, reference to personal experience, or emphasizing that stereotypes are more than just cultural generalizations because "sometimes they are actually true". Thus, the analyses lend strong support to the commonly held assumption in DP that 'self' and 'other' are socially constructed and negotiated in discourse rather than predefined cognitive categories (cf. also de Cillia *et al.* 1999; Wodak *et al.* 2009). Finally, we saw

that uncovering negative outgroup stereotypes is a gradual process, moving from relatively innocent metaphors to rather negative images. Step by step, the group suggests increasingly more negative outgroup characteristics, and they support each other in their mutual accomplishments by building on each other's suggestions (Condor 2006; Ladegaard 2011a).

Another feature of stereotyping which is relevant for our discussion is the fact that stereotypes often reveal more about the observer than about the objects that are being observed (Said 1978). Ladegaard (1998b) found that when Danish students were being asked to identify their popular perceptions of the USA and the UK, they selected areas where these cultures were perceived as significantly different from their own culture. Therefore, what is being perceived as 'different' cannot be separated from the observer and his/her cultural background. In the Danish focus group, the respondents also discussed an animal metaphor for their own workplace, and they suggested a hamster, although they could not explain why. This suggests that they see themselves as small, certainly in comparison with Germany (an elephant). Perception of 'other' cannot be separated from perception of 'self', and if the employees see 'the other' as big, threatening and overly efficient, or as difficult, argumentative and unreliable, then these stereotypes may reflect, first and foremost, how they do *not* (wish to) see themselves.

Finally, I shall discuss the implications of my findings for organizations. If stereotypes provide anything positive to the world of business, these focus group interviews suggest that they may have a positive impact on the employees' self-esteem and consequently, enhance ingroup harmony. By creating a feeling of dissimilarity from their European colleagues, they manage to indirectly create a feeling of similarity and coherence in their own team, and this may have a positive impact on group harmony in this workplace (Hogg and Terry 2001; Hobman, Bordia and Gallois 2003). However, the problem that remains is the damaging effects of stereotyping in business contexts. Operario and Fiske (2001) argue that when negative stereotypes develop in organizations, they can be used to rationalize bias and inequality (and, we might add, prejudiced beliefs about colleagues in other countries), and this is exactly what happened in this organization. Immediately following Excerpt 1, JQ tells a personal narrative to the group which confirms the stereotypes they have developed about the French, and he concludes his story by saying: "you have to be a bit skeptical, right, because you don't know if you can trust them [the French], right." So the prejudice which was generated in the group discussion seems to have a negative impact on intergroup harmony and work relations (cf. Fiske and Lee 2008), and the prejudice is justified by reference to personal experience (Tusting *et al.* 2002).

Stereotypes may be variable, flexible, and even contradictory, and should never be separated from the discursive context in which they were created (see Ladegaard 2011a for more evidence). What this study has demonstrated is that they may also have implications for work practices in organizations. We have evidence that some people's service requests are down-prioritized because the requesters (in this case, their Southern European colleagues) are stereotyped as impolite and inconsiderate. Or there may be warnings against working with certain peoples (in this case, the French) because they are stereotyped as unreliable, difficult and argumentative. And the evidence provided by the employees in support of these prejudiced identities is usually irrefutable because it is supported by reference to personal experience (cf. 'I know 'cos I was there' – Tusting *et al.* 2002). Therefore, we have reason to believe that stereotypes are much more than just 'pictures in the head' which provide simplicity and order. They appear to have

potentially serious consequences for people's behaviour, and they appear to serve an important ideological function in that they are used to explain and justify the discriminatory behaviour against certain groups (cf. Jost and Banaji 1994). In conclusion, stereotyping is more than just an individual or intergroup cognitive process; it is "a collective and ideological process linked to the power and social relations of a particular society" (or organization, we might add) (Augoustinos *et al.* 2006: 280; see also Billig *et al.* 1988).

Operario and Fiske (2001) argue that the greatest problem with stereotypes in organizations is that they often operate below the level of conscious awareness, and hence go unchallenged. Therefore, this study advocates that researchers, who work in collaboration with practitioners in organizations, work, not only *on* but also *for* and *with* their respondents and consider it part of their obligation to share their findings with organizational members. The key issue here is empowerment through knowledge and awareness, and this is where researchers can make a difference to organizational processes and intergroup communication. In the Global Communications Project, researchers went back to the organizations they worked with to present their findings and discuss their implications with the employees. We trust this may, over time, have a positive impact on intergroup relationships and work practices. Thus, this article has hopefully made a contribution to what has been called a "truly pragmatic tradition" which promotes "pragmatic research not only as a form of scientific, abstract theorizing, but as a mode of real life intervention" (Mey, Haberland and Fischer 2010: 8).

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## Appendix

### *Transcription Conventions*

Mod. = moderator.

A comma (,) = a short pause (less than 1 second);

(2.0) = a longer pause in seconds.

/ = an interruption;

/ ... / = simultaneous speech.

underlining = the word is pronounced with stress or emphasis.

[nn turns left out] = turns are left out because the content is not immediately relevant to the analysis.

[laughing] = the participant in question laughs;

[laughter] = everybody laughs.

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